

**FEDERALLY  
ENDANGERED**

## Eastern Cougar

(*Felis concolor couguar*)



### Description

The status of this elusive cat is a mystery in the Northeast. Although many have claimed to catch a glimpse of a “catamount” or “panther,” hard evidence of its existence is virtually nonexistent.

The cougar is a large cat. Adult males weigh 175-200 pounds and average 8 feet in length. Adult females weigh 75-175 pounds and average slightly less than 6½ feet in length. The cougar has a long, slender body; small, broad, rounded head; and short, rounded ears that lack elongated terminal tufts. It has a long (26- to 32-inch), thick tail, which is lacking in the bobcat and Canada lynx. Cougars are uniformly tawny; the chance of a cougar being black is extremely low in North America. The underside of the body is whitish, overlaid with buff and dusky spots, especially along the flanks and inner sides of the limbs. The feet are dark brown. The upper lip is whitish, and the back of the ears and tip of the tail are blackish brown. The forepaw has five toes, the hindpaw four. Each digit has a

retractile claw. Track width is 3-4 inches and rarely shows the claws. Tail marks may be seen in deep snow. The cougar’s vocalizations are a purring sound and a high scream.

Cougars are known by many names, including puma, mountain lion, catamount, and panther. For decades, the eastern cougar was

believed to be a distinct subspecies and different from western cougars and the Florida panther (*Felis concolor coryi*). Recent genetic studies, however, suggest that all North American cougars are similar, and there may be no unique subspecies.

### Range and Habitat

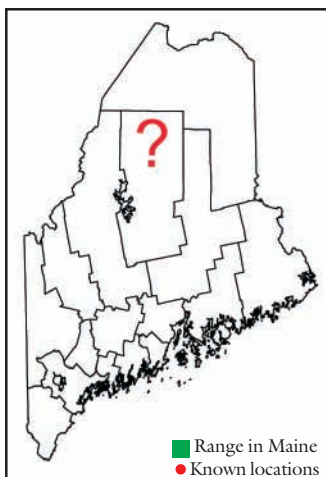
The cougar was once found throughout all of North and South America between southern Canada and Patagonia. The current range of the cougar is greatly reduced, and the species is primarily found in the western U.S. and Canada. However, frequent, unconfirmed sightings are reported throughout its former range in the East. A recent intensive five-year survey effort in the Southeast failed to produce reliable evidence of eastern cougars. The closest known breeding population to Maine is in north-western Ontario.

Cougars inhabit large, undeveloped tracts of habitat. They can live in forested, grassland, and alpine habitats. In general, they are shy, secretive animals, but in recent years they have been seen more frequently in suburban areas in the West where development has intruded into their habitat. Adequate prey, particularly white-tailed deer, is an essential habitat characteristic.

### Life History and Ecology

Cougars reach sexual maturity when 2½ years old. Breeding may occur throughout the year, but peak litter production occurs in the summer months. Several males may be attracted to a mature female and may accompany her until she is receptive to mating. If the males meet, they may engage in aggressive behavior and fighting.

Gestation lasts approximately three months and



litters of 1-6 kittens are produced, with 2-3 kittens being common. Den sites are simple and include cavities in rock outcrops, dense thickets, or under logs in less mountainous terrain. Weaning occurs at 2-3 months of age, and the young remain with the mother until they are almost two years old. Late in their second winter, the young disperse to establish individual home ranges. Because of this prolonged period of parental care, female cougars usually breed only once every 2-3 years, although in some populations, litters can be produced every year.

Cougars are primarily solitary, establishing individual home ranges of up to 25 square miles. In eastern North America, white-tailed deer are the primary prey, although smaller birds and mammals such as snowshoe hare and porcupines may be taken.

## Threats

Cougars disappeared in Maine because of indiscriminate hunting and trapping of predators in the 1800s, habitat changes, and declining deer, moose, and caribou populations. The last breeding population of cougars in the East occurs in Florida. Since these cats require large acreages of undeveloped land, their numbers have been reduced by the presence of highways, development, and human activity.

## Conservation and Management

Accounts of cougars are common in historic literature from Maine. However, the last documented eastern cougar was killed in 1938 in northern Maine. Numerous sightings have been reported in Maine and New Brunswick in recent years. However, many of these are likely domestic cats, dogs, bobcats, lynx, and fishers that were mistaken for cougars. Tracks, scat, and hair samples, believed to have come from cougars, recently have been observed or collected in Maine and New Brunswick. Some MDIFW biologists and wardens also believe they have seen cougars. If cougars exist in the wild, it is possible that these animals are escaped pets, particularly in urban or coastal areas where suitable habitat is not available. Cougar tracks have not been encountered in state and federal winter track surveys in northern Maine for wolves and lynx. There is no evidence at this time that a breeding population exists in the state.

In 1969, the eastern cougar was placed on the federal Endangered Species List. This subspecies is also listed as Endangered by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES). There is no open hunting

or trapping season on cougars in Maine. Perhaps cougars will disperse across Canada and recolonize their former range in the state. Large tracts of forestland in the northern, western, and eastern portions of Maine could support these animals.

## Recommendations:

- ✓ Report all cougar sightings to MDIFW as soon as possible. Sightings can be verified from good photographs, tracks, scat, or hair samples.
- ✓ Conserve large blocks of unfragmented forestland to maintain the long-term integrity of habitat for potential recovery. Avoid the construction of new high-volume/high-speed highways in currently undeveloped areas of northern, western, and eastern Maine. 🐾